

Interpretive Themes

Interpretation provides opportunities for people to increase their understanding and appreciation of the significance of park resources. Interpretive themes are the most important ideas or concepts to be communicated to the public about a park. They are based on park purpose and significance statements, and connect park resources to relevant ideas, meanings, and values. Themes set the framework for interpretive activities, and are the anchors that organize the visitor experience throughout the park.

The planning team, guided by scholars, has developed a draft thematic framework that includes a statement of the overarching idea, themes that flow from that idea, and accompanying example stories. The following section presents the overarching idea and theme topics, statements and content paragraphs. The content paragraphs, which have been condensed in the newsletter, describe the context for each theme.

Overarching Idea

The ending of the Civil War witnessed the failure of the South to become a separate nation and confirmed the United States as a single political entity—outcomes backed by constitutional changes that have re-defined American society. It was experienced by many as the end of slavery. The people of Appomattox experienced the promise, fears, and expectations brought about by the economic, social and political upheaval, as did others nationwide. The struggles and negotiations among different groups arising from this upheaval have been continually re-evaluated as society's values and views on the war have evolved.

Topic #1:

From Petersburg to Appomattox: The Final Days & Surrender

On April 9, 1865, Generals Grant and Lee set the tone for the men who had followed them into battle, choosing reconciliation over vengeance and mutual citizenship over regional differences, thereby signaling the effective end of the Civil War. The peaceful conclusion—unlike most civil wars—was not a given, as injuries and hatreds on both sides could have led to a bloody aftermath in the wake of the nation's most destructive war.

Theme Content

This theme focuses on the surrender—the campaign from Petersburg to Appomattox, the events of April 9, the immediate aftermath, including the stacking of arms on April 12 and the paroling of Lee's army. It examines the choices made by the commanders and their political leaders as well as the soldiers within the context of the times, and how these choices influenced the outcomes of the Civil War. The nuances of this watershed event can be explored from many different perspectives, including: military strategy, politics, the leadership and personalities of generals Grant and Lee and their civilian superiors, as well as the personal stories of the soldiers and villagers who participated in the dramatic events.

Topic #2: The Legacy of Appomattox

Appomattox came to symbolize the promise of national reunification, a first step on the long road to dealing with sectional divisions. However, this ideal was not always supported by reality, as African Americans struggled for equal rights ostensibly guaranteed by the Constitution. White southerners coped with economic and political dislocations, and feelings of submission, humiliation and resentment. The tensions among conflicting societal forces are part of the unresolved legacy of Appomattox.

Theme Content

The idea of peace with honor and national unification symbolized by the Appomattox surrender was replaced by fear, chaos and violence (different from the wartime violence that preceded it), which gripped the nation in the wake of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination. A period of readjustment followed, known as Reconstruction (1865-1877), in an attempt to restore order, protect the rights of freedmen, and reorder the social and economic structure of a devastated South. The theme explores how the expectations, hopes and promises of Appomattox were played out in a larger political context. It explores whether the expectations and hopes held by the villagers, as well as by the soldiers involved in the surrender or even the country at large, were met or remained unachieved.

Topic #3: Memories and Meanings

Appomattox occupies a significant and compelling place in our national memory. The meaning of the historic events at Appomattox has been shaped and reshaped by the differing views held by veterans interested in national reconciliation, white Southerners supporting the Lost Cause, African Americans believing in the promise of freedoms yet unfulfilled, and others. In turn, preservation and commemoration efforts undertaken at the park reflect differing views of the meaning of these events.

Theme Content

This theme focuses on the evolution of thought and perspectives related to the surrender, and the meanings Americans have imposed on both the physical setting of Appomattox Court House and the events that occurred there in April 1865. It introduces the first person accounts and recollections of eyewitnesses as well as varied reactions from observers throughout the nation. It explores the ways that Americans have chosen to remember and commemorate the surrender since 1865, including the re-burial of soldiers, the introduction of monuments, scholarly investigation, preservation and reconstruction of buildings, and creation of the national historical park. It further explores the values and symbolic attributes that different groups have applied to Appomattox over time.

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Initial Management Concepts

The initial concepts for managing the park appear below for your review and comment. Each concept description begins with a focus paragraph, accompanied by statements on the treatment of buildings and landscape features, and on how the visitor experience would be organized. You will notice that the concepts are described in very general terms. The actions that would implement a specific management direction will be identified at the next step in the planning process, when the ideas are refined and the alternatives are fully developed. The resulting 'action' alternatives will describe potential management directions that differ from current management. A 'no-action' alternative encompassing the current management practices at the park will also be described.

1. Five Days in April 1865

The park is a window into the past, and the visitor steps back in time. The focus is a military perspective on the chronology and significance of the events during the five days from April 8-12, 1865. Sites and buildings in the park that played a role in the battles, surrender, and the events that followed are emphasized.

- Features of the landscape are returned to their appearance in April 1865 to the extent possible. Structures significant to the outcome of the battles and surrender are restored and reconstructed.
- Key events, and the aftermath of the war, are seen primarily from the perspective of the soldiers and their leaders.

2. From Petersburg to Appomattox, a Regional Partnership

The focus includes the five days and is broadened to encompass the entire Appomattox Campaign, which ended at Appomattox Court House. The park represents the culmination of a military campaign that effectively terminated the Civil War, and the commemoration of the end of the war.

- The park landscape is generally preserved as is. Military and commemorative resources are emphasized.
- The park is the focal point of the region that highlights the Appomattox Campaign. New regional partnerships are established to promote a coordinated visitor experience and the preservation of sites associated with the campaign.

3. Civil War Meanings and Memories

The focus is on the commemoration of the surrender and the end of the Civil War, and on the ways in which the events at Appomattox Court House have been understood and held in national memory. There is coverage of the events that led to Appomattox Court House and of the meanings associated with this significant place.

- Commemorative features from different time periods are featured. The village is central to this concept, and the story of its preservation and reconstruction in the development of the park is emphasized. Key features in the village may be restored or reconstructed to their 1865 appearance or later.
- The park supports a learning center, housed in a room at or near the park or on the web. A wide variety of media and technology are used to present multiple perspectives on the ending of the Civil War and the meanings associated with Appomattox over time. Visitors can choose to have a 'virtual' experience of the park through the Internet.

4. What Happened Here Changed Everything

The focus is on how the lives of individuals residing in the village of Appomattox Court House and surrounding area changed after the end of the Civil War, as well as on the impacts of the events at Appomattox nationally—the transformation of society, culture and economy wrought by war and the beginnings of Reconstruction. Events leading up to the Civil War, the story of the five days, their significance and the changes in the nation that resulted are covered.

- The park's appearance generally suggests the April 1865 period. Key features and structures related to the surrender and Reconstruction era are emphasized; rehabilitation, restoration and reconstruction may be possible treatments.
- The visitor learns about the residents of the village and the area in 1865 and into the Reconstruction period. The park visit features the village and sites related to the military events and to civilian life in the rest of the park.
- Local heritage tourism sites provide opportunities to tell the broad story.



Among the many connections between the park and the Town of Appomattox is the railroad depot building, near the site of the capture of Confederate supply trains in 1865 prior to the surrender at the village of Appomattox Court House. A stop on Lee's Retreat Civil War Trail, the depot houses the local visitor center.

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National Park Service
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Appomattox Court House NHP
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To stay informed:

- Read project newsletters to keep you up-to-date.
- Visit the park's website at <http://www.nps.gov/apco/> for postings on the planning project.
- Provide comments and suggestions at APCO_GMP@nps.gov.
- To be added to our mailing list or to send written comments, address correspondence to: Superintendent of Appomattox Court House National Historical Park, P.O. Box 218, Appomattox, VA 24522.

Schedule for the General Management Plan

Planning Activity	Dates	Public Involvement Activity
Define issues	Completed	Public meetings, agency meetings, focus group sessions, Newsletter #1
Assess resources and significance	Completed	Scholars' Roundtable
Present initial management concepts (first step in the development of alternatives)	Current	Review and comment on the management concepts, purpose and significance statements and interpretive themes included in this newsletter (#2). Check park website for studies.
Develop full range of alternatives, including no-action alternative	Winter - Spring 2004	Watch for Newsletter #3; review and comment on the management alternatives.
Produce and revise draft GMP/EIS	Spring - Summer 2004	Attend public meeting and or write to the park to provide review and comment on the draft GMP/EIS.
Produce final GMP/EIS	Fall 2004	